



AIR CONTROL DOCTRINE - A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

It is an interesting coincidence that the first places where the then-emerging doctrine of air control, or 'air method', was trialled were British Somaliland (now Somalia) and the former Ottoman provinces of Mesopotamia which after the First World War were formed into the British-controlled mandated territory of Iraq. Both the nations have remained world trouble spots to this day, requiring British, American and Australian military intervention within the past decade or so. Currently the Western coalition maintains around 140,000 ground troops supported by a large number of aircraft in Iraq. In Somalia there has not been any coalition ground presence since the early 1990s, but the United States has resorted to air strikes against anti-American ground fighters as recently as January this year.

not matured to the extent required for the concept to be put into efficient practice in a way that matched the rhetoric. Available technology at that time did not permit accurate bombing and the actions conducted by the Air Force invariably led to extensive collateral damage. Therefore, it was not surprising that the concept was not pursued with any great vigour, even by die-hard air power enthusiasts.

In the very early stages of the Vietnam War, before large scale ground intervention, the United States employed air power in an attempt at air control of sorts. However, it was not until the 1991 Gulf War that the concept of air control was revived, although it was not explicitly called by that name. The main effect of the earlier air control activity was one of deterrence and it remained so even in its new



Iraqi tanks and vehicles destroyed by air power - Desert Storm

The concept of air control was actually a tailored response to difficult circumstances that the Royal Air Force found itself in, vis-à-vis its independent identity. The fact that it worked, when employed with adequate caution and in conjunction with land forces, made it an attractive proposition for use in colonial policing. While air power definitely contributed to controlling the colonies, for various reasons the real efficacy of air control was greatly exaggerated at that time. The concept of air control was, to say the least, revolutionary, but air power capabilities had

iteration. In 1991, air power was used extensively to deny manoeuvre opportunities to the adversary land forces, thereby limiting their employment potential. Subsequently, the concept was further refined and used in what came to be termed the 'kill box' tactics. As was the case in the early days, this was a classic case of a joint approach to prosecuting the enemy. In the 'kill box' concept, the surface forces contained the enemy within a designated area which was then attacked by air power with no fear of any

unforeseen friendly casualties. This worked extremely well during the 1991 conflict.

However, a deeper analysis of the 'kill box' concept reveals some drawbacks. Firstly this technique could only be successfully employed in battlespaces that were open and conducive to cordoning enemy forces within designated areas. Even though air power sensors now have the capability to 'see' at night and through smoke, dust and bad light, they are not sufficiently developed to penetrate environments such as thick jungle foliage and elaborately constructed shelters. Second, the terrain of the operation determines whether an enemy can be effectively cordoned off to be picked out by air power. It is effective in vast remote areas that would otherwise swallow large numbers of troops, but its impact may be somewhat diluted in urban combat zones. Finally, in cases where the control of the air is contested, even a little bit, air and ground operations to contain and attack enemy forces in a discrete area may become untenable. Although the concept was extremely successful in 1991, it must be borne in mind that it was achieved in a situation of overwhelming air superiority.

Even when applied with caveats, a concept such as air control will always intrigue concept developers. This is more so in a global situation that views even the slightest collateral damage as unacceptable and is more attuned to deterrence and creating strategic effects than responsive destruction. The classic air control role as practiced in the 1920s is obviously a thing of the past.

Despite these challenges, the concept has seen a rebirth in the so-called 'war against terrorism' albeit in an altered form. Ironically it was in Afghanistan, where the concept had been used in the 1920s, that this revival took place. Once again, it is not referred to as air control, but the core objective has remained the same – to deter an adversary and deny them the opportunity to manoeuvre. Much has been made of the symbiotic relationship that now exists between Special Forces and the offensive elements of air power. The image of a Special Forces operative calling down an air strike on adversaries is now common place. The underlying doctrine behind this goes back to the original concept of air control. Once again the synergy between high-technology, high-end air power capabilities and ground forces, in this instance the Special Forces' ability to flush out hidden adversaries, makes a war-winning combination.

This tactical success has entrenched a twenty-first century version of air control as a method of combating surface forces. The concept envisages the surface forces herding the enemy into a designated area and then facilitating air power in attacking or even eliminating them. Well-executed, such action will lead to the enemy, so cornered, being more likely to surrender than put up an unequal fight. The effect is more of deterrence rather than destruction.

There is an on-going debate within the arm-chair warrior community regarding the role of the surface forces in the implementation of this concept. It is understandable that surface forces are chagrined at the support role that they have to play in these operations, but the realities on the ground point towards this type of air control as the optimum way to prosecute a very vaguely defined conflict against elusive adversaries. For effectiveness, both air and ground forces will have to play their parts expertly, with high levels of integration.

Air control as perceived in the 1920s, without adequate air power capabilities to support even the least complicated of objectives, has evolved into a new and hitherto unforeseen concept. The acceptance of the need to be a seamless force, using the individual competencies of the constituent parts, is obviously the cornerstone on which the contemporary air control doctrine rests.

- *Air control is a continuously evolving concept.*
- *It was used to great effect in the 1991 Gulf War in its modified form, facilitated by the improvements in offensive air power capabilities*
- *The move towards a seamless force makes the concept of air control in a joint manner a viable and attractive proposition in contemporary conflicts.*

"Air control can be established by superiority in numbers, by better employment, by better equipment or by a combination of these factors."

- General Carl 'Tooe' Spaatz.



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